Politics

America’s Cyber Forces Grapple With Cluster of Deaths by Suicide

US Cyber Command members work at Fort Meade, Maryland. *Photographer: Josef Cole/US Cyber Command*

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The US military's cyberwarfare unit is scrutinizing an unusually high number of deaths by suicide among personnel over a month-long period this summer, according to government officials and other people familiar with the matter.

The deaths have worried US lawmakers and military leaders within the secretive section of the armed forces, which defends American computer systems and hacks foreign adversaries, according to the people and records reviewed by Bloomberg News. They've also resurfaced officials' longstanding concerns about the mental health of military hackers who have over the last year seen their workload surge because of foreign conflicts.

Between early June and early July, as many as five people who worked in or closely with US Cyber Command took their own lives, according to internal military communications, public records and the people. They spoke on condition that they not be identified because they weren't authorized to discuss the matter.

In June, Cyber Command's leader acknowledged three suicides in an email to staff, said two of the people. Public records show two more suicides followed.

One of the dead was Technical Sergeant Kevin Stallings, a digital network intelligence analyst whose family told Bloomberg they wanted him to be identified to bring greater attention to the suicides. Stallings was stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland, Cyber Command's headquarters. He took his own life the month before he'd have turned 37.

Stallings grew up in a military family, enlisted in the Air Force right out of a Virginia high school and spent nearly two decades in the service. He traveled the world, earned a degree in intelligence analysis and received several decorations, according to military records and family members. They remembered Stallings as a devoted and discreet officer, who loved riding his motorcycle, reading Green Lantern comics and his chihuahua, Scud.

"Kevin cared about everybody," said his brother, Adam Stallings. "I believe his mission was to protect us all."

Suicide is rarely caused by a single event or circumstance, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The military is actively investigating the

circumstances of at least one of the recent deaths. Exactly what motivated these suicides isn't clear from the records, and even to some of the people familiar with the deceased.

Cyber Command personnel generally work far from the physical front lines of war in roles that are largely secret. In some cases, they suffer from insomnia, memory loss, rumination and physical illness, according to Erick Miyares, a psychologist and former National Security Agency employee who conducted a 2025 study based on interviews with 50 US cyber operators. The Army-funded study hasn't been released due to security concerns, Miyares said.

This account is based on police reports, obituaries, state death records, internal military communications and interviews with more than a dozen people familiar with the suicides.

The quick succession of deaths has led Cyber Command to link them as a so-called suicide cluster, according to a person familiar with the matter. The Pentagon defines such clusters as suicides taking place closer together than normal and requires that they be addressed with specific actions.

This year, Cyber Command's workload has surged because of factors including the US war with Iran and other foreign conflicts, according to a government official and other people. The work's tempo has also been driven up by the race to use and guard against new artificial intelligence models that are increasingly adept at hacking computer systems, they said.

The command has faced "chronic shortages of proficient personnel in key work roles" since it was founded in 2010, according to the National Defense Authorization Act from 2023. Andrew Schoka, who spent seven years there, described a workplace where it was difficult take breaks or ask for help, resulting in a high turnover rate.

"There's always a crisis and everything's always a priority," said Schoka. "We would burn people out faster than we could produce them."

General Joshua Rudd became the leader of both Cyber Command and the NSA in March. The next month, he wrote to both Congressional committees that oversee the military, saying one of the command's top unfunded priorities was spending $11 million to study and address cyber personnel's mental health. The money was for "cognitive, psychological, physiological and spiritual sustainment for high-tempo cyber operators," Rudd wrote in the letter, which Bloomberg reviewed.

"Without funding, burnout and force degradation will increase," he told lawmakers.

The military declined to make Rudd or another official available for an interview. Cyber Command and the Pentagon didn't answer detailed questions for this story.

"The loss of any member of the military community is a tragedy, and our deepest sympathies are with their loved ones," a Pentagon spokesperson said in an emailed statement. The military "remains steadfast in our commitment to suicide prevention," the spokesperson said, adding that it "takes a comprehensive, integrated approach to suicide prevention" at all levels.

As a result of these "tragic incidents," the Senate Armed Services Committee "is actively engaging with Cyber Command to discuss what resources are needed," said committee spokespersons. The House Armed Services Committee has inquired with the Pentagon about the "increase in suicides" and is awaiting a response, according to a spokesperson, who called it a "critical issue" and said the committee "will continue to conduct rigorous oversight."

The most recent defense authorization act required counselors at all Cyber Command sites to address stress at work.

At Cyber National Mission Force – an elite Cyber Command group whose high-speed work includes directly supporting the US military's foreign operations – staff have seen demand for their work increase and the time to deliver fall, said people familiar with the matter. Months of working long hours under intense pressure have deepened internal worries about staff well-being, they said. Some of the dead worked within that unit, according to people familiar with the matter.

On June 22, Rudd informed Cyber Command staff of three deaths by suicide in the prior two weeks, an official familiar with the matter said. Rudd's message included a suicide hotline number, contact information for military chaplains and other mental health resources, the official said.

Hours after the email, Stallings, the network intelligence analyst, was found dead by suicide, according to police reports and Maryland death records. The next day, the command held an all-staff safety meeting where leaders encouraged personnel to support each other and seek help if they needed it, the official and two people said.

Yet another man took his own life two weeks later, records show. After the July 6 suicide, Brigadier General Joed Carbonell-Lopez sent a message acknowledging the death to a Maryland National Guard unit that supports Cyber Command. The

Maryland National Guard didn't respond to requests for comment.

"As we grieve through this difficult time, please take time to check in on each other," Carbonell-Lopez wrote in a message Bloomberg reviewed. "Call that buddy you haven't heard from since last drill. Call your airman that you think might be weathering a storm. Check in on your supervisor or commander and make sure they're doing alright, too."

In 2024, the military had more than 23 deaths per 100,000 service members, nearly double the suicide rate for the US population, according to the Pentagon's most recent report on suicides. It says four people in "cyberspace operations" took their own lives that year, as did 14 in "signal intelligence/electronic warfare." It's unclear how these categories correspond with the staff of Cyber Command, which didn't answer questions about how many people have died by suicide there in past years.

The total number of Cyber Command employees isn't public, although the command has said its core team has more than 6,000 staff. The specifics of what they do are largely classified but in March US leaders publicly credited Cyber Command with disrupting Iranian networks when the US went to war there.

Cyber Command and the NSA are both headquartered at Fort Meade, with deeply entwined workforces. Their personnel can endure streaks of long, isolating shifts inside secure, windowless facilities, according to people familiar with the matter. According to military records, some of the people who recently died by suicide had roles with both the NSA and Cyber Command.

In 2024, a Pentagon study on the "degradation of mental health and job performance" at the Cyber National Mission Force found significant and unique mental health issues. The study recommended creating dedicated care teams across the force. According to a person familiar with the matter, it wasn't fully implemented.

It was a colleague who first alerted police that Stallings might be in trouble.

On June 22, hours after Rudd's email about the earlier suicides, an Air Force official called local authorities in Maryland to request a welfare check on the technical sergeant, police call records show. The official, who isn't identified in the records, told the dispatcher that Stallings had been unreachable for more than four days and that they were "extremely concerned."

Police rushed to Stallings' apartment near Fort Meade and found him dead, according to the records. Air Force Office of Special Investigations officials also came to the

scene. A spokesperson said the agency couldn't comment because its probe is ongoing.

"This doesn't make sense about Kevin," his brother said. "Knowing that it happened to others confirms in my mind that something else is going on that needs to be addressed and should have been addressed a long time ago."

If you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide or self-harm, a global list of helplines is available at blog.opencounseling.com/suicide-hotlines/.

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